

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Bureau of Agricultural Economics



THE MIGRANTS AND CALIFORNIA'S FUTURE

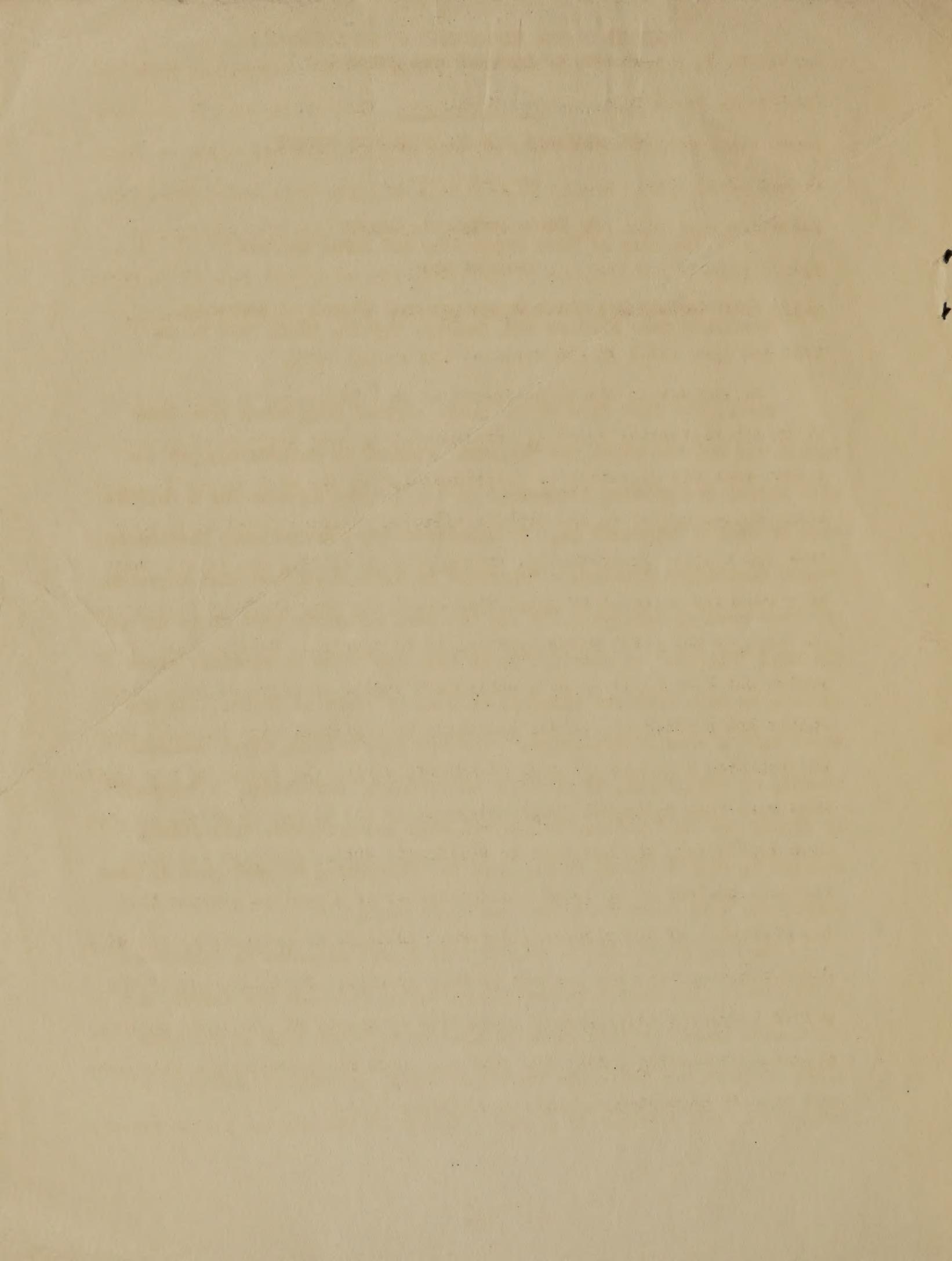
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During the past five or six years a great many words have been spoken and written about the "migrant problem" in California, yet one will search the growing literature on the subject in vain for a definition of what a "migrant" is. In Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Unabridged Edition, a "migrant" is defined as "one that migrates; one that changes habitat...."; and the same authority goes on to define the word "migrate" as meaning "to go from one place to another; especially, to move from one country, region, or place of abode....to another with a view of residence." Webster says nothing about economic status, or occupation, or previous condition of servitude. A "migrant" is simply one that moves. To conform with authoritative definition, therefore, when we speak of migrants to California, we must have in mind people who have moved here from somewhere else.

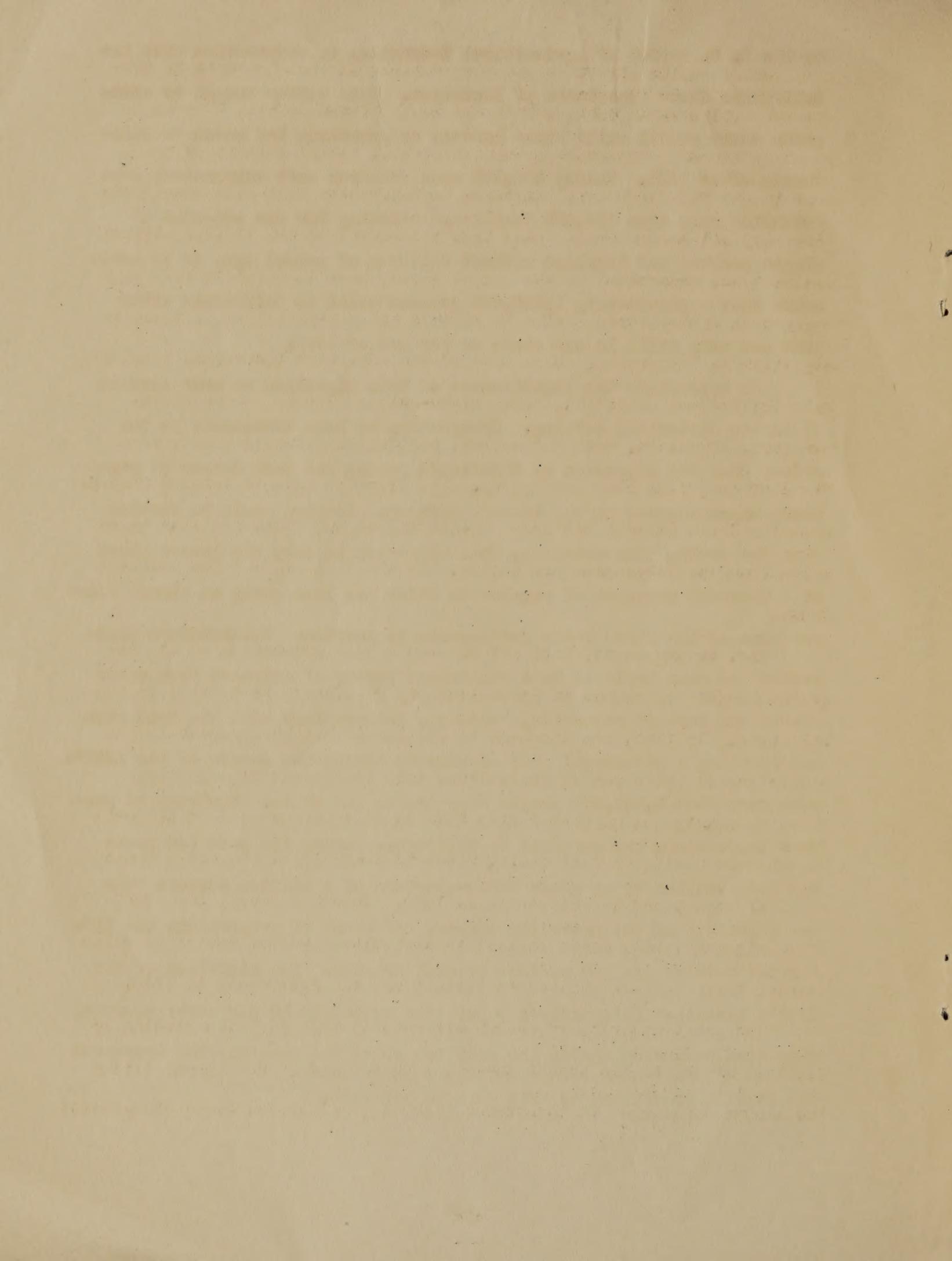
How many people can be regarded as recent migrants to California in the sense that they have moved here during the past ten years? A conclusive answer to this question must await tabulation of the 1940 Census returns but the basis for a reasonable preliminary estimate is afforded by the findings of a survey conducted through the public schools



by the U. S. Bureau of Agricultural Economics, in cooperation with the California State Department of Education. This survey sought to enumerate every school child whose parents or guardians had moved to California after 1929. Nearly 200,000 such children were enumerated, representing more than 116,000 families. Allowing for the omission of single persons and families without children of school age, it is estimated that approximately 1,250,000 persons moved to California after 1929 and were still in the state at the end of 1939.

To appreciate the significance of this migration we must examine it in its historical setting. Frequently, we hear statements to the effect that the migration to California during the past decade is something unprecedented in the State's history. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Historically, this migration is only the latest phase of a westward movement of population which has been going on almost since the time of the first white settlements in America. California's population has been built up by a continuous stream of migrants from other states and foreign countries, beginning in magnitude with the Gold Rush and reaching a phenomenal peak of numbers during the decade of the 1920's when more than 2,000,000 people migrated to the State. Contrary to popular impression, the movement to California during the past ten years has been smaller by at least three-quarters of a million persons than the migration of the preceding decade. In terms of proportions the difference between the two periods is much greater. The migration of the 1920's increased California's population by nearly 60 per cent; whereas, migration occurring during the past ten years has probably not increased the State's population by more than 20 per cent.

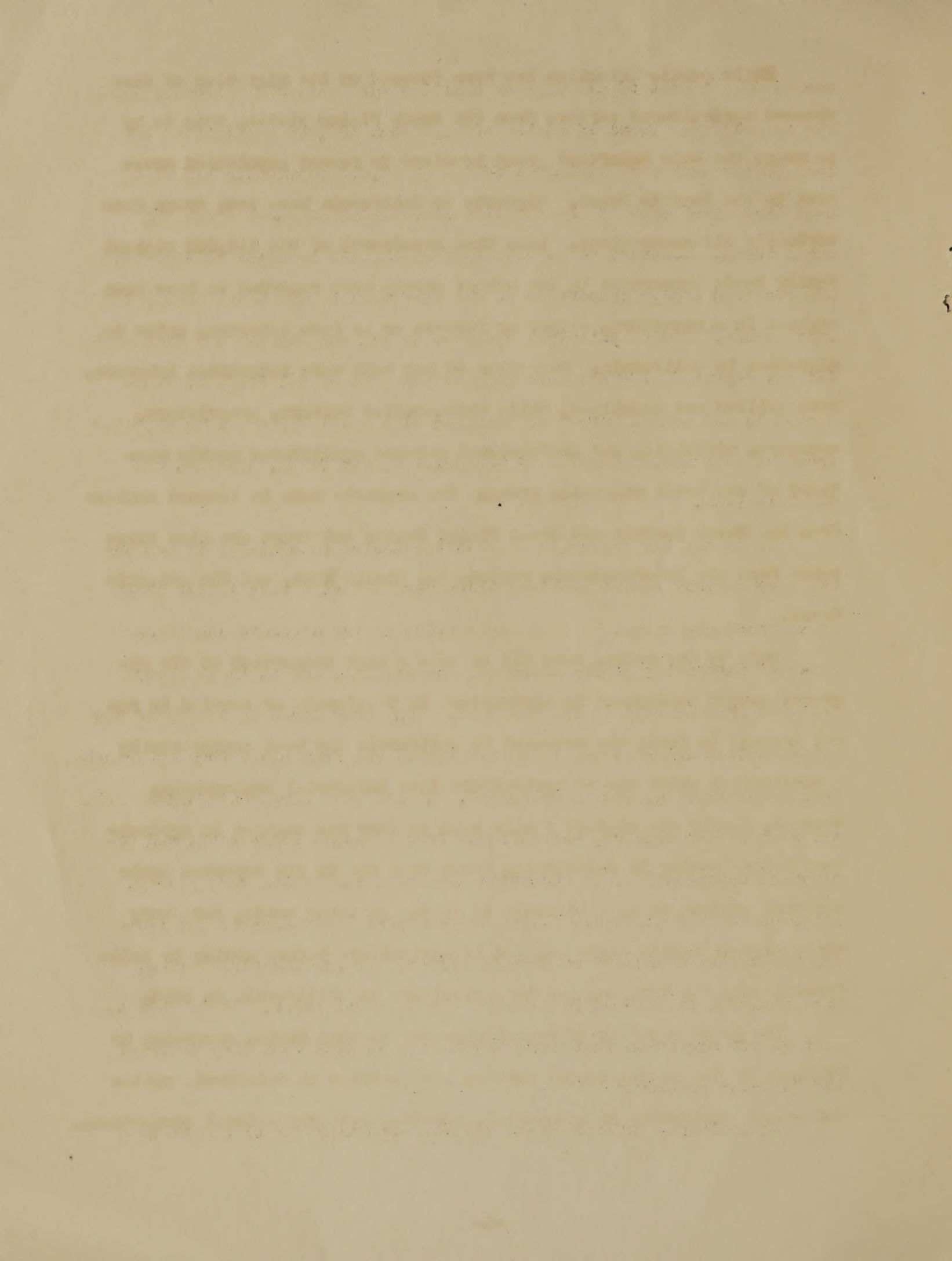
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While public attention has been focused on the migration of distressed agricultural workers from the South Plains states, this is by no means the only important group involved in recent population movement to the Pacific Coast. Migrants to California have been drawn from virtually all occupations. Less than one-fourth of the 116,000 migrant family heads enumerated in the school survey were reported to have been engaged in agriculture, either as farmers or as farm laborers, prior to migration to California. More than 40 per cent were industrial laborers, both skilled and unskilled, while white-collar workers, proprietors, managers, officials, and professional persons constituted nearly one-third of the total migrating group. The migrants come in largest numbers from the South Central and Great Plains States but there are also thousands from the Inter-Mountain region, the Middle West, and the Atlantic Coast.

Nor, by any means, have all or even a high proportion of the migrants sought employment in agriculture in California or settled in rural areas. In fact, the movement to California has been accompanied by a substantial shift out of agriculture into industrial employments. Whereas, nearly one migrant family head in four was engaged in agriculture before moving to California, fewer than one in six reported agricultural employment in California in 1939. In other words, for every three migrant family heads engaged in agriculture before moving to California, only two were engaged in agriculture in California in 1939.

The great majority of recent migrants to this State, according to findings of the public school survey, have settled in California cities and sought employment in industrial, service, and professional occupations.



Nearly 40 per cent of all migrant families with children attending public schools were found in cities of more than 100,000 population. More than 60 per cent were living in cities of 10,000 population and over. Less than one-fourth of the families were living in rural areas and small towns. Contrary to popular impression, the interior valleys have not received a high proportion of the newcomers to the State during the past decade. Twelve principal counties in the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys reported slightly more than 17 per cent of all families enumerated in the school survey as compared with nearly 60 per cent reported from the four urban counties of Los Angeles, San Diego, Alameda, and San Francisco.

It is not the intention of this discussion to minimize in any way the very serious social problems which have attended this latest phase of westward migration. A large proportion of the migrants come from areas of materially poorer economic, educational, and cultural opportunities than prevail in the Far West. Many have moved in search of new opportunities after having their livelihood cut from under them by drought, farm mechanization, and unemployment. At the same time, California, like the rest of the country, has suffered from economic depression, and employment opportunities in the State have been increasing very slowly. Large numbers of migrants, facing over-crowded labor markets and lacking the skills necessary to compete effectively for industrial jobs, have sought a livelihood in seasonal agricultural labor. It is this aspect of the migration that most people have in mind when they speak of the "migrant problem."

Agricultural employment has offered opportunities of a sort to a

large number of newcomers, not because of any general scarcity of labor in this field, but because of certain characteristics of the labor market which make possible the spreading of a limited amount of employment over a large number of workers. The seasonal-migratory farm workers have always been a depressed group in Pacific Coast agriculture, suffering from under-employment and low earnings and largely deprived of legal protections which have been developed for workers in nearly all other industries. The entrance of thousands of distressed migrant families into agricultural labor has served to make an already bad situation worse, through increased sharing of available work.

The difficulties of the migrants in re-establishing themselves are reflected in bad housing conditions, inadequate diets, lack of medical care, and lack of other elements of a decent living. During the past five years we have witnessed the growth of hundreds of new slum areas--"shacktowns," located for the most part on the outskirts of cities in unincorporated territory where cheap building can be carried on largely unrestricted by building codes or legal sanitary requirements. Outside the "shacktowns" migrant workers crowd into cheap auto camps and squatter camps, living under conditions destructive of morale and dangerous to health. Counties and local communities in many instances have been confronted with needs for relief and medical care too great for their resources.

These and other undesirable social conditions have been widely publicised and are familiar to most Californians. There is another social aspect of migration, however, which is less generally recognized, namely, the significance of migration for future population growth. As

pointed out above, California's population has been built up by a continuous stream of migrants from other parts of the country. Future growth of population is equally dependent on migration from other states. California's birth rate is one of the lowest in the nation. As measured by the number of children under five years of age per thousand women of child bearing age, California had, in 1930, the lowest fertility rate of any state in the Union. If migration to California had ceased with 1929, on the basis of then prevailing birth and death rates, California's population would have increased by only two per cent during the decade 1930-40 and in 1940 would begin to decline. More important perhaps, then the total number of population, is the sharp change in age-distribution which would occur in the absence of migration. Had there been no migration since 1929, California would have had in 1940, nearly 150,000 fewer children under 15 years of age than in 1930 but 175,000 more people aged 60 years and over. In proportional terms, the number of children under 15 would have declined 11 per cent by 1940 but the number of persons 60 years of age and over would have increased by more than 30 per cent. Without migration, California's population in all ages under 45 would have begun to decline after 1935, but the number of people 65 years old and over would still be increasing as late as 1960. Each successive year after 1940 would see fewer children, fewer adults in the prime of working age, and more old people, and the population as a whole would follow a downward trend. Actually, these trends have been greatly retarded during the decade just past by the influx of a migrating group containing large numbers of young people and relatively few elderly persons.

In view of the present population trends, migration is essential

to prevent a declining population and to maintain anything like the present balance between the numbers³ of young people, middle-aged people, and old people. If these objectives are desirable, then the wisdom, not to mention the feasibility, of proposals to return distressed migrants to their places of former residence and to greatly restrict the flow of population from other states, is called sharply in question. Rather, the course of wise policy would take the direction of concerted Federal, State, and community effort to expedite and facilitate the absorption of the migrants into our economic and social life. Insofar as the migrants constitute a depressed group, their problems differ only in degree from the problems of other depressed groups and require treatment in the same way.

An adequate program for the economic and social assimilation of the migrants will require much thought and experimentation to work out. There are some things, however, that clearly need to be done. Much is already being accomplished by local, State, and Federal agencies but there is need to extend and improve existing efforts and to reach out in new directions. Housing at costs which low-income workers can afford to pay is a primary need. The migratory labor camps operated by the Farm Security Administration provide much-needed seasonal housing facilities and also serve as temporary resting places where migrant families, as yet unsettled, may find shelter and time to gather their strength while taking the measure of the problem which confronts them. But the Federal camps are not an alternative to the shantytowns. Decent, permanent housing is needed on a large scale to eliminate those now and growing slums. Here again the

Farm Security Administration has made a contribution with its "Garden-Homes" for agricultural workers, but the need is vastly greater than the resources thus far available to meet it.

Adequate health protection is another basic need. The conditions under which low-income people have to live and their frequently insufficient and poorly balanced diets, make them an easy prey to disease and thus curtail their ability to work. The various County Hospitals, County and State Health Departments, and the Farm Security Administration have done much to meet the most pressing health problems of distressed migrants and other low-income workers. Their efforts should be continued and strengthened.

There is need for more effective means of assisting workers to find jobs. Continuing effort should be made to improve the job placement machinery already established under Federal and State legislation. Opportunities should be provided for migrant workers to acquire the skills necessary to compete effectively for jobs. To this end, adult education and vocational training programs should be organized with a view to the requirements of industry, and their services made widely available. As said before, the necessitous condition of many newly arrived migrants and their lack of training in other than agricultural work, has been at least partly responsible for the overcrowding of the agricultural labor market. Even so, a strong tendency has been manifested for formerly agricultural workers to shift into other industries. Improved methods of job placement and vocational training can assist workers in getting out of over-crowded and poorly-paid occupations.

To some extent, migrant families can be assisted to establish

themselves as farmers. The cooperative farm settlements of the Farm Security Administration and the new lands to be brought under irrigation during coming years point the way to opportunities in this direction. Opportunities for farm settlement, however, are probably more limited, in number, at least, than opportunities in other directions.

In conclusion, I would like to refer again to the fact that the movement to the Pacific Coast during recent years is only the latest phase in a long history of westward migration. The migrants of the past decade have but followed an ancient and honorable tradition of going west. In earlier years, people moving west were called "pioneers." Today, we call them "migrants." The pioneers of an earlier day moved to an expanding frontier. The present-day migrants find the frontier closed, the land costly, the labor markets overcrowded. Our problem is to re-open the frontiers of opportunity.

